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“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Asia Pacific Women’s Watch and Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development

The Asian-Pacific Research and Resource Centre for Women and the Asia Pacific Women's Watch state that women's role in realising the sustainable development goals will only be achieved through empowerment in all facets and at all stages of women's lives.

Women, who make up half of the world's population, continue to be over-represented among the world's most vulnerable and marginalised groups, as access to resources, opportunities and power remains highly skewed towards men and face the brunt of gender stereotyping and discrimination.

Gender equality and equity is a goal in its own right but also a key factor for sustainable economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability. Sustainable development cannot be achieved without women being recognised as equal partners in development, women being provided opportunities to break out of their vulnerable and marginalised situations, and without enabling a more equitable distribution of resources. Systemic barriers that prevent women and girls from accessing resources and benefits must be challenged and addressed for meaningful and long-term change.

While economic growth remained steady in Asian-Pacific and across the Global South, it is uneven across the regions and within countries. Income inequality continues to increase, especially in the major developing countries. While the number of people living in these regions who are poor (living on less than 1.25 US\$ a day) has fallen, many people continue to be amongst the poorest of the poor, and women and girls constitute the majority. Poverty in middle-income countries remains a problem proving that the benefits of economic growth have not trickled down sufficiently to those who need it the most. People living in poverty become even more vulnerable when faced with food insecurity and vulnerability to natural and human-made disasters and other shocks. Women remain in very few decision-making positions, including in political spaces to voice their concerns and share their worldview.

Limitations for women and girls reaping the benefits that sustainable development offer

Poverty makes it challenging for women and girls to access resources including economic resources, credit, and food as well as limiting their abilities to access health care, including access to sexual and reproductive health services. Women and girls' inability to overcome poverty by accessing quality education and acquiring skills that are in demand in the labour force are further barriers. Lack of gender-sensitive and comprehensive sexuality education for all, including for uneducated and out-of-school women and girls, further inhibits women's choices and opportunities.

Maternal mortality and morbidity, inadequate access to contraceptives, a lack of continuum of quality reproductive care are still notable in these regions, and poses further challenges. According to the World Health Organisation, the main

causes of maternal mortality include excessive haemorrhaging, hypertension, and abortion-related injuries, restrictive and inadequate abortion policies, unavailability of safe, legal and unconditional abortion services, inadequate and unaffordable access to healthcare, lack of access to contraceptive information and services, lack of skilled birth attendance, inadequate antenatal care coverage, emergency obstetric care services, and violence during pregnancy. The lack of private health sector regulation, increasing privatisation of healthcare and high out-of-pocket expenditures pose further barriers and limit women's access to universal access to health, including sexual and reproductive health.

Girls affected by traditional and cultural practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation, are limited from fulfilling their full potential and are exposed to violence. These practices affect girls' ability to progress, limit bodily integrity, decision-making, right to education, healthy lives, including reproductive lives, and a life free from violence.

The scourge of violence throughout the Asia-Pacific and Global South regions, including sexual violence against women and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities, if allowed to continue, is another limiting factor to sustainable development. There is a need to ensure better laws and policies on rape, including marital rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment, ensure the effective implementation of such laws and policies, and ensure convictions. Increasing armed conflicts and growing militarisation in the region continue to make women and girls vulnerable to sexual violence. At the same time, there is a need to also change perceptions of women's role in society and notions of violence. Women have to be respected and treated as equal to men if we are to realise sustainable development in totality.

Increasing internal and cross border migration of women in the region is another factor. Women often resort to migration, in many cases, go undocumented and without safety measures, because their options are limited in home countries.

The context in which sustainable development is ensured should be considered in terms of ensuring a conducive environment for its success. In doing so, the challenges posed by religious fundamentalism and climate change, both of which have been increasing throughout the region, are notable.

Religious fundamentalism and interpretations of religion, illustrates the political (mis)use of religion and how this may limit rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, of women and marginalised groups. Women are often considered the custodians of family norms and honour and religion is used to control them in direct and indirect ways. As a result, their bodies and sexualities, as well as freedom of movement, reproduction, and dress, become sites of religious control.

Climate change exacerbates poverty and vulnerability, and has specific impact on women and girls, their health and well-being, such as their access to clean air, safe drinking water, adequate sanitation and sufficient food.

Demands for achieving gender equality for sustainable development

- All concerns — whether economic, social, cultural and environmental should be undertaken in an integrated and holistic manner to ensure sustainable development. It is important that gender equality is not considered a socio-cultural issue alone. It should be treated as a crosscutting objective.
- A key condition in achieving sustainable development is recognising that empowering women is a process that encompasses both the creation of an enabling environment for women which is free of discrimination, and strengthening women's ability to take control over their own lives and bodies, and fully contribute to bringing about the needed changes in societies. Policy decisions have to be made so they reduce these inequalities and governments and civil society need to take this forward through joint action and commitment by all.
- Strengthen the foundations for sustainable development. Provide women with equal opportunities as men, including in decision-making processes.
- Equal participation and involvement in all policy areas and at all levels of implementation will ensure that women and men take equal responsibility for sustainable development.
- More systematic information including sex-disaggregated economic and social indicators and gender-sensitive indicators helps identify gender gaps, acknowledge inequalities and monitor them and efforts have to be made to resource these needs at national levels.
- The efforts of organisations at regional and global levels, as well as of national institutions to ensure gender equality, in order to achieve sustainable development have to be supported, including ensuring adequate resourcing and strengthening capacities to address the inequalities at various levels of development.
- Recognise and support efforts of women's advocacy groups that have been playing an important role in drawing attention to the gender dimension.
